

Minding the Gap: A Custom-Made Seminar Program for Ensuring Transfer Success

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Westminster College

- Private, selective, small, residential
- Liberal arts
- Traditional student population
- 14% international, 65 countries
- Increasing number of transfer students
 - Fall 2006 – 19
 - Fall 2007 – 28
 - Fall 2008 – 46



Transfer Student Retention at Westminster

- Freshmen returning for the Sophomore year
 - Fall 2005 to Fall 2006 = 80%
 - Fall 2006 to Fall 2007 = 83%
- Transfer students returning for the following year
 - Fall 2005 to Fall 2006 = 68%
 - Fall 2006 to Fall 2007 = 79%



How Policy Affects Practice, How Practice Affects Policy

- Westminster Seminar program
- SRT (Student Response Team)
 - Academics and Student Life
- SAC (Social & Academic Council)
 - Academics, Student Life, Enrollment Services

Practice → Policy → Practice



Review of the Literature

- Annotated Bibliography of Research and Research-related Literature On College Student Transfer 2000-2008
 - January 20, 2009
 - Heidi Kirkpatrick, Terrence Fung, Jason F. Simon, and Spencer Smith Editors
 - The University of North Texas National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students
 - Available at
 - <http://transferinstitute.unt.edu/resources.html#ess>
- Attached Bibliography of Relevant Articles



Review of the Literature

- Increasing number of transfer students and students with transfer credit
- Access to various types of institutions for transfer students
- Transfer students attending several institutions before graduation
- Need for and design of special programming that helps transfer students make the transition
- Retention rates for transfer students
- Use of NSSE to study transfer students



Defining “Transfer Student”

- Number of hours
 - A high school student with 30 hours of AP and dual credit hours?
 - A working mom who is just beginning her postsecondary education?



Defining “Transfer Student”

- Prior college attendance
 - A student who has attended another institution for one semester but was unsuccessful?
 - A student who has completed several successful semesters at another institution?
 - A student who has earned an Associate’s degree or completed 60 hours at another institution?



Defining “Transfer Student”

- Previous enrollment in a freshmen experience course
 - What if the credit hours are not equivalent?
 - What if the learning objectives are not equivalent?



Our definition of “Transfer Student”

- Freshmen Transfer
 - Still needs Westminster Seminar
 - Fewer than 24 successful postsecondary hours while a fulltime college student
- Transfer
 - Has previously completed a freshmen experience course
 - More than 24 successful postsecondary hours while a fulltime college student



The Transfer Seminar

- Came about from
 - SAC discussions in Spring 08
 - Literature review
 - Definition of “transfer student”
 - Increased focus on retention



Course Description

- This course focuses primarily on skill-building as a means of preparing the student for success in future courses at Westminster. Because the seminar is designed to help the student make a social as well as academic transition, the class consists of a blend of orientation and skill-building sessions. By the end of the seminar, the student will have found her or his place on campus and feel confident in having the academic skills to succeed.



Learning Objectives

- engage in critical thinking within the framework of an academic setting
- experience how a variety of academic disciplines relate to our chosen topic
- investigate a range of strategies, skills, and resources for effective performance and success as a student
- develop and demonstrate reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills
- participate in a small, collaborative academic community



Course Structure

- Academic Component
- Campus Connect Component
- 1 credit hour
- CR/D/F grade
- 46 students in Fall 2008
- English and Computer Science professors
- 2 student mentors



Academic Component

- Students were divided into two groups
 - Monday class
 - Friday class



Goals of the Academic Component

- Assess reading, critical thinking, presentation, and writing skills
- Give students a clear picture of the level of these skills expected at Westminster
- Practice skills
- Accomplish all of this in a one-hour course!



Philosophy Behind these Goals

- Students gain a clear understanding of Westminster's expectations for reading, critical thinking, and writing.
- Students need a transition course through which they begin building the skills they need to be successful at Westminster.
- Such a course works best if it takes place in a non-threatening environment in which students are allowed to try out ideas, admit to shortcomings, and even fail--without lasting penalties.
- Transfer students, perhaps more than freshmen, need encouragement to feel comfortable asking for help—from professors, advisors, the academic assistance programs Westminster offers, and from each other.



Assignments

- Paper 1: In-class, timed reading/writing assignment, assessed and revised
- Paper 2: Research argument paper



Paper 1

- As quickly as possible, read the article, “The World Awaits: Globalizing U.S. Education” by Duane Acker, highlighting/underlining key points.
- When you have finished reading, write an essay that does the following:
 - briefly introduces the article and summarizes the key reasons, according to Acker, that U.S. education needs to be globalized
 - presents and argues for a thesis that critiques Acker’s arguments for globalized education
 - concludes by synthesizing Acker’s suggestions for globalized education with your own thoughts about the topic



Paper 1 Grading Rubric

- uses the **proper style in introducing** the essay
- **summarizes** the key points, but does so in a concise manner
- **presents a thesis** that **critiques** Acker's article
- **develops this critique** in 2-3 paragraphs
- briefly **synthesizes** Acker's ideas with your own
- includes one or two **key quotations** and **documents** them properly
- presents all information in a **clear and accurate** manner, demonstrating **proper word choice**, **strong sentences**, and **organized paragraphs**



Paper 2

- Research Argument: practices skills of library research, summary, synthesis, analysis, argumentation, and documentation.
- Gets students into the library, meeting with a librarian, and conducting both in-house and on-line research.
- Allows for discussion of the Honor Code and plagiarism.



Paper 2 Grading Rubric

5 = exceptionally well-done; 4 = good work; 3 = okay, but needs more attention;
2 = barely there; 1 = not cutting it

- _____ The introduction contains an overview of the topic, a means of getting readers interested in the topic, and a thesis statement.
- _____ The thesis statement is strong (interesting, can be argued, narrow enough to cover in five pages).
- _____ In the introduction or in the early paragraphs, the writer offers adequate background information so that readers understand the important issues.
- _____ The writer uses three sources.
- _____ Sources are solid, from trustworthy publications, varied (books, articles, websites) and relevant.
- _____ Quotations are well-integrated into the text, with long quotations blocked, source information clearly identified, and plenty of explanation provided.
- _____ Paper is well-organized with topic sentences that connect to one another in some way and connect to the thesis.
- _____ In an early paragraph, the writer incorporates opposing views in a way that is fair and thorough.
- _____ In general, paragraphs are coherent and cohesive as well as fully-developed; that is, they should present and support a main idea by connecting sentences tightly to each other; also, they should be developed with specific, credible, and well-documented evidence.
- _____ The conclusion explains the significance of the ideas explored in the paper.
- _____ The writing is generally clear and free of grammatical errors; if possible, the writer establishes a sense of style that is both academic and interesting.



Classroom Activities

- Short in-class writing assignments
- Discussion of essays, in order to reinforce the skills they were asked to practice with Papers 1 and 2
- Discussion/explanation of the skills they were practicing
- Discussion of sample papers
- Group work



Campus Connect Component

- Wednesday meetings
- All students together
- Mostly taught by guest speakers



Campus Connect Topics

- General Education Requirements
- Designing Your Major
- Campus and Community Involvement
- Career Services
- World Within Westminster
- Churchill Memorial
- Health and Wellness Opportunities
- Financial Survival



Sample Assignments

Declaring your Major

Option 1: If you are a transfer student and know without a doubt what your major and/or minor will be (not a self-designed major or minor):

- Find out the name of the chair of the department in which your intended major is housed.
- Meet with the department chair to discuss the major and complete the declaration of major/minor forms.
- Meet with your new advisor and determine a preliminary schedule of classes for the next two years (or your remaining time at Westminster).

Option 2: If you are a transfer student and intend on completing a self-designed major and/or minor:

- Meet with the Associate Dean to discuss the process.
- Determine the faculty members of your committee.
- Complete the forms for the major, including the description and list of required courses.



Sample Assignments

Campus and Community Involvement

- Assignment: Review the Club Book online and in your own words, describe in one paragraph each three clubs or organizations that are relevant to your personal interests or professional goals. What is the most interesting organization about which you learned?
- Assignment: Describe violations of the Honor Code and potential penalties.



Results and Recommendations



Preliminary Retention

- Freshmen returning the Sophomore year
 - Fall 2005 to Fall 2006 = 80%
 - Fall 2006 to Fall 2007 = 83%
 - Fall 2007 to Fall 2008 = 83%
- Transfer students returning the following year
 - Fall 2005 to Fall 2006 = 68%
 - Fall 2006 to Fall 2007 = 79%
 - Fall 2007 to Fall 2008 = 79%
- Fall 2008 Transfer students returning Spring 2009 = 88% (35 out of 40)



Feedback from students

	4	3	2	1	
	Very Relevant	Somewhat Relevant	Of Minor Interest	Not Relevant	
Overview of General Education	17	13	2	0	3.47
New Student Orientation	6	14	8	4	2.69
Designing Your Major	14	11	3	3	3.16
Campus & Comm Involvement	12	13	7	0	3.16
Attending the Club Fair	10	13	8	1	3.00
Career Services	15	14	3	0	3.38
World Within WC/Study Abroad	8	12	9	2	2.84
Health & Wellness Opportunities	10	17	5	0	3.16
Financial Survival	18	6	6	2	3.25
Symposium on Democracy	6	14	8	4	2.69
Reading & Discussion Assign.	9	16	5	2	3.00
Writing Assign. & Feedback	18	9	1	4	3.28



Comments from Students

- The writing assignments provided a good opportunity for getting an idea of what professors expect.
- This part [writing] was a great idea because it helped me become a better student.
- I really felt like my critical thinking skills improved.
- Feedback on the papers helped a lot.
- Our discussions were challenging but really interesting.
- Talking about writing step-by-step, and very thoroughly, was great.



Comments from Students

- The reading and writing assignments were good for people who need help, and they kept the class interesting.
- I liked the writing assignments because they helped me see where I stand and what I need to work on.
- The writing assignments helped so much! They helped me not only with this class but with all my others and with my future.
- Through this class, I gained a better understanding of what Westminster is all about.
- I appreciated you tailoring this seminar to the needs of transfer students.



Possible Pitfalls

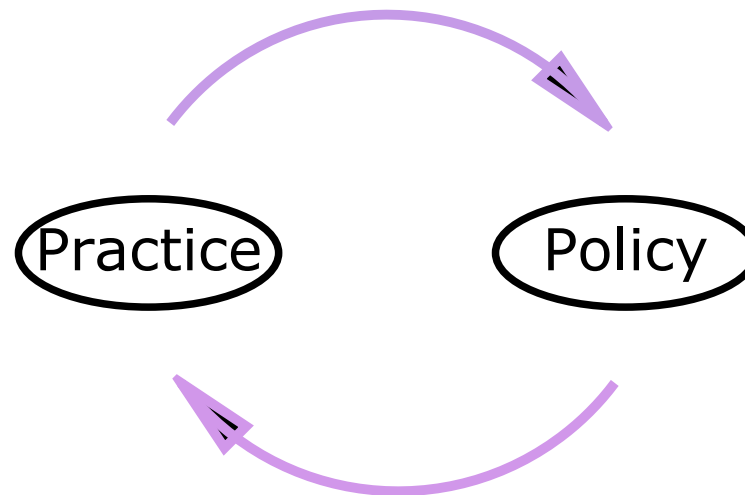
Not all comments were positive:

- Seemed like I had done it all before, although I do think I got better at writing.
- Some students come in as transfers already knowing most of this, so it feels like a waste of time.
- Reading and writing assignments mostly just added more stress.
- I just wasn't interested.



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Enhancements to Course

- Smaller class size (16 in Spring 09)
- No Friday class
- Encourage weaker students to enroll in Library Research course
- Add History of Westminster as a topic
- Collection of more complete data at admissions
- Considering making this course a requirement or condition of admission



Questions?

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